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AUTHOR Shuman, R. Baird
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ABSTRACT

The industrial model has penetrated every avenue of American existence; even education is compartmentalized in the United States for the purposes of management and immediate efficiency. One initial step that has been taken toward creative and constructive change in education is the institution of cross-disciplinary humanities courses. English departments can fit into the broad humanities curricula by offering courses that are team taught by an English and a social studies teacher. The literature base for such humanities courses must be strong and should help students to increase their understanding of the world, both science and art, and their ability to effectively deal with symbol systems and metaphor.
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HUMANITIES EDUCATION: AN ORGANIZATIONAL GOAL FOR SCHOOLS

R. Baird Shuman

If Marshall McLuhan is correct in assuming that "the medium is the message," as I believe he is, then it is reasonable to assume that social structures, social institutions, folkways, and other culture-containers hold within them intrinsic messages about the groups out of which they have grown. In a very real sense, the ways of a people, developing through an evolutionary process, become that people as history records them: the Goths were ferocious, the Spartans war-like and ascetic, the Athenians cerebral, the Eskimo peaceable and generous. Mankind can be classified in many ways and in each method of classification is a message not only of the group being classified but also, and much more accurately, of the classifier.

Some would divide mankind into male and female, a classification which serves a number of purposes. Others would divide mankind, for purposes of easy classification, into short/tall, light-skinned/dark-skinned, Christian/non-Christian, educated/uneducated, employed/unemployed, northern hemispheric/southern hemispheric, young/old, literate/illiterate, carnivorous/vegetarian, dead/living, royalty/commoner, patriot/traitor, and hundreds of other polar categories. Some classifications are arrived at objectively (dead/living, employed/unemployed, royalty/commoner, etc.); but even in these objective

R. Baird Shuman is Professor of English and Director of English Education at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. The author of some 300 articles and nine books, his most recent publications are Creative Approaches to the Teaching of English: Secondary (Peacock, 1974) and Questions English Teachers Ask (Hayden, 1977). During 1978, the National Education Association will publish his Strategies for Teaching Reading/Secondary and Scarecrow will publish his Educational Drama for Today's Schools. Mr. Shuman serves as Executive Editor of The Clearing House.

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classifications, an increasing amount of blurring is presently being encountered-- "When is one dead?" has become a significant legal question of late, for example. Other classifications are highly subjective (young/old, short/tall, patriot/traitor) and are dependent for their meaning upon the value systems of the people making them--Is a six-foot, four-inch Watusi tall or short? A five-foot, four-inch Pygmy? In such judgments, the point of reference provides the basis for comparison, and the point of reference is the message, because it refers to whoever is making the comparison.

Edward T. Hall refers to Sapir's "Conceptual Categories in Primitive Languages" (Science, 74 [1931], p. 578) and quotes Sapir's statement that "[C]ategories such as number, gender, case, tense, mode, voice, 'aspect' and a host of others . . . are not so much discovered in experience as imposed upon it."¹ This is supportive of Hall's earlier speculation that at the beginning of the industrial revolution, "villagers and field hands were brought into the factory to work. These first generations of mill hands were not conditioned to the whistle. Like all preindustrial peoples, when they earned enough to pay off their debts and keep them for a while, they quit and went home."² But Hall points to what he calls "the hidden trap": because there was no one at home to look after the children when their parents went to work, the children went along and worked too. And this generation "became imprinted by the whistle. They then brought up their own children accordingly."³ This is perhaps an oversimplified capsulization of the factors that have led to the compartmentalization of western institutions; but, for whatever complex combination of reasons, American society is, to borrow Hall's term, monochronic and compartmentalized.

Shelving the Boxes

For purposes of management and immediate efficiency, most schools in our

society are relatively uniform containers which hold the things of which schools are expected to be composed. The time containers consist of a number of 50- or 55-minute boxes, a couple of 15- to 20-minute boxes (for homeroom and mid-morning break), and a 30- to 35-minute box for lunch. There are some larger boxes for the elect--a two-hour box for athletes who practice after school or for participants in the school play, who rehearse in the evening; a one-hour detention box for those who have elected in some way not to conform; a very special three- or four-hour box, high on a shelf somewhere, into which a school trip will fit, but only occasionally; a two- or three-day box into which the spring trip to New York/Washington/Denver/San Francisco/Seattle/ or wherever will fit, but only once in a year or perhaps only once in a whole secondary school career, and then only for those who have the money to go.

Then there are the information containers, in most schools all of equal size, labeled "English," "Social Studies," "Biology," "Algebra," "Foreign Language," etc. In some cases, more than one box has the same label because "English" and "Social Studies" must be spread over a broader area than "Algebra" or "Biology"; but usually within a given year, each student receives five of these boxes and that constitutes a year of formal training in so-called major courses. (The term is the message.) A few smaller boxes also clutter the scene, variously marked "Art," "Music," "Physical Education," "Driver Education," "Hygiene," "Drama," etc. Being a quantitative people, we take these smaller boxes (minor courses) less seriously than we take the larger boxes; they are the fluff which tops off something solid. The medium again communicates the message. The message is the culture, the culture the message.

All of these boxes occupy the big box, possibly a box without walls, but more often a box full of smaller boxes, full of smaller boxes still, full of

even smaller boxes ad infinitum. The industrial model has penetrated every avenue of American existence (save the Navajo and other splinter groups of peoples maladjusted or unadjusted to mainstream American society) to the extent that Hall can justly and categorically say, "Man has put himself in his own zoo. He has so simplified his life and stereotyped his responses that he might as well be in a cage."⁴ "Might as well be in a cage?" you might ask. Let us allow Hall the private pleasure of engaging in that hallowed Anglo-Saxon literary convention, litotes.

While schools are a microcosm of any society that supports them, they are often extreme examples of some of the conventions of the societies to which they are related. The degree to which our schools conform to an industrial model is roughly proportionate to the degree to which they project a distorted image of the society. The messages of such schools are numerous: (1) we are training workers rather than cultivating thinkers; (2) we are preparing the raw product (students) to fit into an industrial mode; (3) we are placing obedience and conformity high on the scale of social values; (4) we are assuming that everyone will benefit from essentially the same sort of training, because, elective courses notwithstanding, the six or seven period school day and the designation of major and minor courses communicates a structure reflecting the societal imperatives that, presumably, schools should be promoting most vigorously.

Smashing Some Boxes, Reshaping Others

In many instances of late, school programs have reflected the possibility of using models other than the industrial one in organizing educational experience. Modular scheduling has enabled students to spend school time according to their individual needs rather than according to the hypothesized needs of the "average"

student. Humanities programs and curricula based upon inquiry have freed students from some of the narrow, subject-matter constraints that have been artificially imposed upon learning and that have forced a lock-step conformity upon generations of learners. Allowing school programs to expand beyond the school and into the community, as with the Foxfire movement in Rabun Gap, Georgia or the Parkway Program in Philadelphia, has offered new and enticing learning possibilities for many students whose exceptionality was never demonstrated within the boundaries of stereotypical school programs in traditional settings. Only in recent years have educational alternatives existed on any widespread basis for those who are not programmed to be passive receptors of information, although it has long been noted that many people whose school achievement was not good have been able to succeed in the world outside the school and, conversely, that many people who have succeeded well in school have been unable to succeed well in the real world. It is surprising that educators have not been more curious about this phenomenon and that they have not turned more strenuous research efforts into investigating the reasons for it.

The social unrest of the 1960s forced many urban school districts to explore means of providing educational opportunities to those who would not fit into the conventional educational mold. Even earlier than that schools in many places had to expand and alter their emphases in order to meet the needs of returning GIs. Even though many schools still resemble schools of fifty years ago in their organization and curricula, social necessity has imposed change upon many others, and a new and encouraging flexibility is gradually appearing in educational circles across the nation.

Many teachers realize the need for drastic change, but feel powerless to do anything to bring it about. I would remind every teacher that Foxfire,⁵ the Parkway Program,⁶ and other such innovations did not spring full blown from

the head of Zeus. Rather, people with zeal, insight, and determination have been able to present sufficiently persuasive cases to skeptical school administrators and to even more skeptical communities that they have been permitted to try something new and drastically different. In the case of Foxfire, Wigginton originally was not permitted to involve students in the program on school time; now Foxfire touches every aspect of life in the Rabun Gap school district and is firmly entrenched as a major portion of the total curriculum.

Certainly an initial step toward creative and constructive change has been taken by many school districts which have instituted cross-disciplinary humanities courses which, in some instances, have led to the institution of humanities programs. The remainder of this paper will be concerned with attempting to suggest how existing English departments can best fit into broad humanities curricula.

English and the Humanities

The ideal humanities program would be inquiry-oriented and open-ended. Students would pursue interests, teachers would serve as resource people. Any and all subject matter would be fair game as students press toward unlocking the mysteries which they come upon in their inquiry. However, given the nature and structure of today's schools, the implementation of such programs would predictably meet with the sort of concerted resistance that would make their full realization impossible. A major stumbling block would be that such programs, to be effective, would probably have to be conducted in such a way that grading student effort and accomplishment would make little sense. Also, most teachers still feel uneasy about being resource people and nothing else.

So within the confines which reality imposes, humanities programs have often been team taught and have resulted from merging some English classes

with some social studies classes. Often art and/or music have been added components of such programs. Evelyn Copeland reports that "with rare exceptions the first humanities courses were organized in one of three ways: by chronology, by great themes, or by great epochs."⁷ Ironically, in an age which is dominated by science, most humanities curricula have excluded science. Irving H. Buchen writes of humanities programs that "many exclude the physical sciences or bewail the dehumanization of man by technology." Buchen points to the great irony and inconsistency of this, continuing, "Frequently, those who cry the loudest against the evils of technocracy consult concordances put together by computers, cite articles reproduced by Xerox, allude to manuscripts and out-of-print books made available on microfilm and play back Hopi burial chants on audio cassettes."⁸ The split between the humanities and the sciences, noted in detail by C. P. Snow in his two cultures speech,⁹ remains with us, and in all probability the humanist still does more to maintain the split than does the scientist.

In this regard, however, and of particular importance to the English teacher involved in humanities programs, is Stephen Spender's brilliant insight that "in the famous controversy about the two cultures, one important point seems to have been overlooked--that if there truly is a gap between the literary and the scientific culture, this cannot be bridged by science but only by language. Language is the only means of communication between specialities as far apart as every individual's experience of his own life." Spender continues, "When there is a question of discussing and explaining our experiences of the other arts--music or painting--we use words. If architecture aspires to the condition of music, all human experience aspires to words."¹⁰ This statement, if it has any validity at all, clearly places language at the vortex

of all humanities education. James Moffett goes a step further than Spender in his contention that "English, French, and mathematics are symbol systems, into which the phenomenal data of empirical subjects are cast and by means of which we think about them. Symbol systems are not primarily about themselves; they are about other subjects. When a student 'learns' one of these systems, he learns how to operate it. The main point is to think and talk about other things by means of this system."¹¹ This statement in itself will provide difficulties for many English teachers because it places language so importantly at the center of things, and most English teachers are by training and preference teachers of literature more than teachers of language. But if this statement gives English teachers pause, Moffett's following statement might leave them in a state of utter disrepair: "The most natural assumption about teaching any symbol system should be that the student employ his time using that system in every realistic way that it can be used, not that he analyze it or study it as an object."¹² To teachers bent on explaining and analyzing, this might appear to be the grossest heresy. However, on sober reflection, the reader will realize that Moffett, in this statement, brings students right back to literature in the broadest sense and writing, the two fundamental areas in which they will use the system. However, the English teacher's first duty in the humanities context has to do with language, and this responsibility can be assumed reasonably by no one but the English member of the humanities team. If this person abrogates this responsibility, it is doubtful that humanities education can work.

The Literature Base

The literature base of humanities courses or programs must be strong. For some students, a comprehensive chronological view of significant literature

through the ages will be appropriate. For others, less venerable literary works will serve better. For the former, a humanities background can provide excellent preparation for college level reading; for the latter, literature may be selected from less venerable sources, and values clarification and self-understanding can be the central foci of the reading experiences. The most important precept to keep in mind is that the central purpose in reading is, for most students, that of trying to understand better their world and how they might relate to it. The outcomes in such reading will not necessarily be purely literary, but there is no reason that they need to be. Each student should be encouraged to experience the kinds of reading and investigations that will best serve them, and this probably means that in a typical class of thirty students, no five will be reading the same book at the same time.

Northrup Frye has isolated the fundamental reason for students to read works of literature in humanities programs: "Real society," he writes, "the total body of what humanity has done and can do is revealed to us only by the arts and sciences; nothing but the imagination can apprehend that reality as a whole, and nothing but literature in a culture as verbal as ours, can train the imagination to fight for the sanity and dignity of mankind."¹³ These words, lofty and true as they are, must be qualified, because no literature can have the impact of which Frye writes unless it is right for the reader at the time that he/she encounters it. In line with this sentiment, one might recall John Dewey's admonition that, "Knowledge is humanistic in quality not because it is about human products in the past, but because of what it does in liberating human intelligence and human sympathy."¹⁴ This is not to say that the past is unimportant but rather that man must be at the center of all learning.

Metaphoric Man

One measurement of human development is a person's ability to deal with

symbols effectively and to understand the metaphoric meanings which are the under-
 girdings of all great art, including literature. Bruner tells us, "Metaphor
 joins dissimilar experiences by finding the image or the symbol that unites them
 at some deeper emotional level of meaning. Its effect depends upon its capacity
 for getting past the literal mode of connecting, and the unsuccessful metaphor
 is one that either fails in finding the image or gets caught in the meshes of
 literalness."¹⁵ It is doubtful that any approach to learning offers better op-
 portunities for students to move beyond "the literal mode of connecting" of
 which Bruner speaks than the humanities approach; and the broader and more in-
 clusive the humanities program is, the better are the opportunities for this to
 occur. The Great Chain of Being of the early philosophers, the interrelatedness
 of all things in nature becomes increasingly evident as one moves ever more
 deeply into humanities studies. While one may regard arts and sciences as being
 at different poles, it is perhaps more accurate and surely more intellectually
 productive to consider Herbert Read's way of viewing these two areas of human
 concern: "In the end I do not distinguish science and art, except as methods,
 and I believe that the opposition created between them in the past has been due
 to a limited view of both activities. Art is the representation, science the
 explanation--of the same reality."¹⁶ People whose perception of differences
 obscures or obliterates their perception of similarities are likely to become
 stunted in their growth toward recognizing, understanding, and creating metaphors.
 Anthropologists, according to Hall, agree on three characteristics of culture,
 the second of which is particularly cogent in the light of Read's statement:
 culture "is not innate, but learned; the various facets of culture are inter-
related--you touch a culture in one place and everything else is affected; it is
 shared and in effect defines the boundaries of different groups."¹⁷

Everything points to unity, to oneness, even in the face of seeming diversity. Humanities education can bring students and teachers one step closer to understanding the oneness which undergirds society and in so doing can stretch human perceptions to the point that one day people may come to understand more fully their universe and the role of humankind in it.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹As quoted in Edward T. Hall, Beyond Culture, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976, p. 12.
- ²Hall, p. 4.
- ³Hall, p. 5.
- ⁴Hall, p. 5.
- ⁵For a description of how Foxfire came about, see Eliot Vigginton's Moments which is available from Institutional Development and Economic Affairs Services, 1785 Massachusetts, NW, Washington, DC, 20036.
- ⁶See J. Bremer and M. von Moschitzker, eds., The School Without Walls: Philadelphia's Parkway Program, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971.
- ⁷"Changing Content in the English Curriculum: Humanities in the Schools," in James R. Squire, ed., The Teaching of English, 76th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977, p. 146.
- ⁸"Humanism and Futurism: Enemies or Allies?" in Alvin Toffler, ed., Learning for Tomorrow: The Role of the Future in Education, New York: Random House, 1974, p. 133.
- ⁹The Two Cultures: And a Second Look, New York: Mentor Books, 1964,
- ¹⁰"Language as Communication," in Harold Taylor, ed., The Humanities in the Schools, New York: Citation Press, 1968, p. 83.

¹¹Teaching the Universe of Discourse, New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968, p. 6.
Moffett's italics.

¹²Ibid., p. 7.

¹³"Elementary Teaching and Elemental Scholarship," PMLA, 79 (May, 1964), p. 18.

¹⁴Democracy and Education, New York: Macmillan, 1916, p. 269. Dewey's italics.

¹⁵On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand, New York: Atheneum, 1968, p. 63.

¹⁶Education through Art, London: Faber and Faber, 1943, p. 11.

¹⁷Hall, pp. 13-14. Italics added.